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ABSTRACT

One of a series of instructional booklets designed to introduce adult education program planners to the basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies for conducting needs assessments, this instructional booklet deals with determining how to gather information for a needs assessment. Described first is the relationship of the process of determining how to gather information to the entire needs assessment process. Following an examination of some major collection strategies, guidelines are set forth for selecting those strategies that are feasible and most able to provide valid and reliable information for needs assessment. Also outlined are some retrieval strategies for extracting quality need data from relevant and available printed information. (MN)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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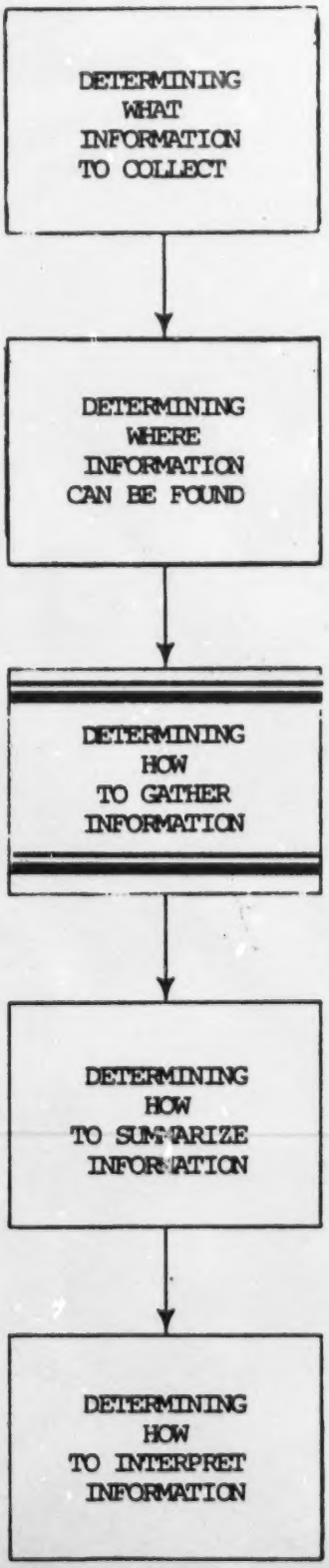
DETERMINING WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT
DETERMINING WHERE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND
DETERMINING HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO SUMMARIZE INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO INTERPRET INFORMATION

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DETERMINING

HOW

TO GATHER INFORMATION

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SERIES PREFACE

This instructional booklet is one of a series prepared by the Special Community Service and Continuing Education staff at Texas A&M University. Its purpose is to introduce a diverse body of adult education program planners to basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies appropriate for conducting needs assessments. A broad base of research and information relevant to practice has been tapped in the development of the series.

This series is not in its final form but is rather "in development" as prepared for one-on-one testing in conjunction with a collection of adult education practitioners. Refinements are to be made subsequent to one-on-one, small group and field testing.

Recognition is given to those agencies and individuals who have contributed to the development of this series:

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Participants in the pilot test activities for generating case study applications: Mr. David R. Chagoya, Mr. Robert Felder, Ms. Alice Franzke, Mr. Jon Johnson, Sr. Maria J. Leavy, Mr. Jose D. Leza, Lt. Col. James V. Mahoney, Jr., Mr. G. M. Milburn, Jr., Capt. William J. Schrank, Ms. Lois Soefje and Mr. Charles Weichert.

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Persons desiring additional information about the instructional booklets in this series please contact:

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DETERMINING HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION

Introduction

Analogy

This booklet should be no more foreign to you than your favorite pastime of extracting a secret and delectable recipe from its protective inventor. This has got to be one of the more fascinating games that people play. And if ever you have played it, you have learned—probably the hard way—that what you see or what you taste is highly dependent upon the whys and wherefores of some very fancy maneuvers or strategies on your part.

Well, let us suppose that your neighbor has become a legend in the immediate vicinity for her silky cheesecake extravaganza. For years you have been itching to have the recipe in your repertoire of foods for special occasions. That is what you have wanted all along, for a long time. You've often tried many tricks of your own to try and approximate her recipe, but to no avail. You and your neighbors have even compared what you did in arriving at your futile results. Now you have decided upon a more aggresive approach. You politely ask for the recipe. What you get is, "I don't want to give it out because if you use it and do something wrong, you will pass the blame on to me, and that will be the end of my fame in the cheesecake circle". You next suggest

—after a respectable interlude—that she join you as one of the chefs for the Elks annual fund-raising dinner. Together, you both can prepare a cheesecake dessert. What you get this time is, "It would be an offense against the palate to serve cheesecake as a dessert for a pancake and sausage roundup". Again, some months have passed, you encourage her to enter the annual "dessert recipe of the year" contest which is being run by the city newspaper. What you get here is, "Those judges lack any sense of fine cuisine; they have grown up on nothing but barbeque and beans. I have no interest in subjecting my 'prize' to the indignities of such common folk". At one point you seriously consider breaking and entering, but dismiss this as too sloppy an approach. Finally, you broach the subject again. The occasion is the first visit, in a three year period, of your mother- and father-in-law. You would like your neighbor to do her part in building family relationships by parting with her recipe. She grudgingly agrees. You make the cheesecake, and it is a prize. At last, you finally struck the right chord and you were able to get the information you so desperately wanted. Count your blessings, you may not have been so fortunate. Some of us have lived through friendships in which a special ingredient or procedure was omitted when the recipe was conveyed and all was not well.

Strategies to gather information are much the same as strategies to extract recipes. Alternative approaches need to be considered so that what appears most likely to succeed will be chosen. It is a fine art and care must be taken to insure that you get what you are after; nothing more and nothing less.

Purpose

Having been introduced to techniques for identifying and locating the major sources of information for your needs assessment, you will now be presented with procedures for gathering your needs assessment information. The purpose of this booklet is to help you to develop and select strategies that are feasible for you in your particular situation and that can provide you with valid and reliable information in the needs assessment process.

This booklet will consist of two major focuses. The first focus is determining collection strategies. Here, we will suggest various methods for obtaining need information from your primary sources, namely, the authorities and target population you have identified for your needs assessment. The second focus is the determination of retrieval strategies. Here, we will provide you with guidelines for extracting data from the printed information which is relevant and available to you in your study.

Linkage

In the second booklet, Determining Where Information Can Be Found, you were introduced to the major sources of need information and some approaches for locating these sources effectively. In this booklet, we will assist you to determine ways of approaching or interacting with your sources of information—key informants and printed information—and thereby improve the probability that you will obtain the quality information you seek. Then, in the following booklet, Determining How to Organize Information, we will show you ways of organizing your information once you have gathered it.

Rationale

At no point in the needs assessment undertaking can one sit back, heave a sigh of relief and simply coast to the finish line. At each stage of the process, it is possible not only to make a tactical error and reduce the effectiveness of that particular part of the whole; but, it is possible also to undo much of the groundwork which had been previously laid. If ever this were true, it is true of the data gathering process. By the time you have reached this decision point of the needs assessment process you have very deliberately determined the critical information which you are after. You have also determined the most appropriate sources to tap in securing this information. These now are givens in your needs assessment. Care must continue to be exercised in gathering your data. You will be wanting to reflect upon whether method 1 or method 2 or method 3 is the best way to secure this particular bit of information from this specific source. You know your information and you know your sources, now you must pick the right piece of the jigsaw to make a perfect fit. Gathering information from authorities, target groups and printed information is a challenging undertaking.

Quite different strategies are likely to be dictated for collecting information from authority groups and for collecting information from target populations. Not all collection strategies will fill the bill across the board. Very probably there is not one single strategy equally suitable nor feasible for getting information from various informant groups. Therefore, when obtaining need information from different sources, we might select different strategies in order to tap

information most effectively.

When retrieving need data from printed information, it is critical that we select only information that is objective, rigorously collected, and in agreement with the purpose and coverage of the needs study. Practically, it would be of little value to us if we retrieve information that has been collected carelessly or with bias and may thus have questionable validity. Besides, if the information retrieved is not compatible with our needs assessment in respect to its objectives and coverage, some hard decisions are called for.

Determining Collection Strategies

Concept

In this section we will discuss some major collection strategies and guide you in the process of selecting those strategies that are feasible and are most able to provide you with valid and reliable information for your needs assessment.

A collection strategy is defined as a method whereby data relative to human needs are obtained from authorities or target groups. A collection strategy is the method you use in approaching your key informants in the needs assessment process. For instance, you may want to approach the authorities through group sessions and informal contacts, and you may also choose to reach the target population of your needs study through some form of survey and some selective personal observations. Each of these approaches carries with it unique advantages as well as disadvantages. To make the best use of each approach, it is important for you to be able to recognize these.

By way of a specific example, let us suppose that you have been

assigned full-time by the corporate training manager for Texas Instruments to do a "feasibility study" on the development of corporate post-retirement career preparation programs for pre-retirement employees and their spouses. You have been allocated six months for your study, have been provided with an assistant, a secretary and a budget for non-personnel expenditures of $20,000. Assuming that you have made careful determinations regarding the information with which you ought to fortify yourself and the ideal key informants and printed information to consult, the following scenario is quite likely in terms of data collection strategies. You make plans for an extended on-site visitation of the two model programs currently in the third year of operation within a sister industry in the country. You make plans for observing the operation and for meeting with the program leadership, current participants, "enlistees" and "graduates" of the program. You also make plans for open plant meetings for the employees of T. I. age forty and over and their spouses; as well as plans for a mailed survey of personnel retired from T. I. within the past two years. Management will be polled via weekly in-house management memos to assess the level of support for such a program. Lastly, members of the Governor's Council on Aging and its regional representative have agreed to serve as a committee providing feedback as requested during the needs assessment process.

Process

To identify valid, reliable and feasible collection strategies from key informants for your needs assessment, we propose that you follow four steps.

First, develop an extensive listing of possible strategies for

collecting data from the key informants. One type of strategy involves individuals responding independently to your stimulus questions. Mailed questionnaire surveys, personal individual interviews, telephone studies, newspaper or other media surveys are of this first type. A second type of strategy involves the collection of data from groups of people. Open forums, panel discussions, town meetings, information sharing groups, seminars, workshops, conferences or meetings with an advisory group are of this second type. In addition, don't forget that there are numerous ways of reaching the authorities or target population for your needs assessment informally.

Second, compare the relative advantages and disadvantages of each strategy. Will the strategy provide valid and reliable information? Let us look at another example. You, Associate Director of the Valley Co-op, have just received funding from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Division of Adult Programs, to conduct a pilot program in nutrition education for migrant women in the Valley. You have decided a needs assessment is appropriate. You are anxious to learn how these women perceive their needs. You have decided on a mailed survey questionnaire. Hold everything! Mailed questionnaires have been employed very effectively in the past in various settings to determine nutrional needs of women, so it is not an untried method of data collection. But, do migrant families have addresses that would make postal service delivery likely? Are all migrant women literate in the language of the survey? Are they apt to be skeptical of responding for fear of some powerful entrapment? Are they ashamed of their conditions and in need of anonymity? Are they apt to be resentful of what they feel would be

an imposition of anglo eating customs and norms? Has "schooling" ever been a positive force in their lives? Would a mailed survey—assuming it was deliverable and could be read—be an appropriate data collection strategy given the major attitudinal barriers that are likely to exist?

So, in general, it might be safe to say that a mailed questionnaire in a survey allows wide coverage with minimum expense; affords wide geographical contact; reaches people who are difficult to locate; and gives the respondents time to respond, opportunity to consult with someone else and a chance to respond independently. It is also possible to say that in general the mailed questionnaire provides no guarantee of response rate, provides no guarantee of the ability or willingness of the respondents to provide information and provides no guarantee against the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting the items in the questionnaire since there is no opportunity for probing questions or observations on the part of an interviewer.

Problems likewise can occur with telephone surveys, newspaper surveys, or even door to door interviews. Further, strategies that involve interpersonal group interaction like consensus meetings, town meetings and such are likewise rarely the perfect solution.

Now, you might wonder which single strategy or collection of strategies would best serve your own needs assessment undertaking. Unfortunately, there are no universally accepted answers; but there are guidelines which you can follow; namely, review each strategy against the backdrop of what information you wish to collect and from whom you wish to collect it, then rigorously note the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy. A caution is in order. It is helpful to

remember that, regardless of the approach which you choose, there will be limitations inherent in that approach and you must be aware of those limitations if you want the strategy to work to your advantage.

In our third step, we suggest that you assess the availability of human skills, personnel, time, finances and physical resources either within your institution or which are otherwise at your disposal for the needs assessment undertaking. Identify those strategies which are feasible to employ in your needs assessment.

Fourth, you should select those data collection strategies which provide you with the most valid and reliable information and which are at the same time feasible for you. In other words, make sure the strategies you employ will give you answers you are seeking and will elicit comparable responses were you to question similar groups or the same group at different times.

Thus, the principle for practice is that needs assessors should select valid, reliable and feasible information collection strategies for authorities and target populations.

Determining Retrieval Strategies

Concept

In the following section we will present some retrieval strategies for extracting quality need data from relevant and available printed information.

A retrieval strategy is defined as a method whereby valid and reliable need data can be secured from available and relevant printed information. A retrieval strategy indicates the way that you actually pull the relevant data from some available document or written record.

There are six factors that have been identified and are generally recognized which directly bear upon the quality of the data you retrieve from available printed information. They are the factors of purpose, definition, geographical coverage, population, time frame and methodology. All printed information which you are considering for use within your needs assessment should be examined in light of these six factors. For example, suppose that you are the Director of Patient Education at the state hospital in Rusk and you are going to study the "coping" needs of the short-term institutionalized adults in the institution.

Over the two years of your working within the hospital you have become increasingly convinced of a single and overriding patient need. It lies in the area of patients' growing perception of themselves as dependent members of the hospital community and a gradual diminishing of the vision of themselves as active, independent and contributing members of the community from which they came to the institution. Your concern is how to assist each person to see himself or herself as effective and at peace in the larger society. You have access to the following printed information: current patient records of the hospital, a 5 year old study conducted by the hospital at the time of its anticipated demise at the hands of the state legislature, a three year old state-wide study of the patient profile of the state institutions, and records on all adult students within the hospital in your educational office.

In reviewing information from each of these sources, ask yourself why the data shown in the records were collected, if these records were

looking at coping needs the same way you are, what geographical area was covered, what population was studied, how long ago was the data collected and what methods were used to collect the data. When you compare the answers to these questions to the purpose of your needs assessment, you should be able to determine whether or not the information shown on such a record is appropriate to your needs study: whether it is completely compatible and can be taken as is, whether it is comparable but in need and capable of adaptation with some extrapolation, or whether a review has yielded incongruity with one or more of the factors and consequently must be discarded. Remember, if the printed information isn't right for your purposes, don't use it.

Process

We suggest a four step procedure in retrieving data from relevant and accessible printed information.

First, we recommend that you assess the printed information which you have found to be accessible and apparently relevant in terms of the six factors we mentioned before. That is, you are asked to appraise the printed information in terms of the objectivity of its purpose; the closeness of its operational definitions--measures--to those employed in your needs assessment; the coincidence of its geographical coverage to the service area addressed in your needs assessment; the matching of the respondents reported upon in the study of the printed information to the target population in your needs assessment; the amount of time which has elapsed between when data was collected and subsequently prepared for publication as printed information in addition to the time which will have elapsed between the initial data retrieval and yours;

and lastly, the rigor of the methodology employed in collecting data for the printed information.

Perhaps you are the newly appointed Training Director for Texas Legal Assistance Society (TLAS), Inc. a private, non-profit organization of 25 part-time lawyers, 3 full-time lawyers, 25 full time paralegal personnel and a limitless number of potential clients.

You have been provided with a "manual". This served as a guide for all training undertaken by the previous training director. It details what each workshop in a three year cycle should address.

Legal Assistance Society, Inc. has decided to conduct a short term legal education assistance program for the Cuban immigrants currently relocated in El Paso. Obviously, our new training director has access to key informants but she also has a very critical document at her disposal. But, here again, she must consider the six questions before buying all or part of the document as a definitive statement for the direction of the short term training program. What about the suitability of the manual in term of its purpose, its content, its geographical coverage, the target group, the "age" of the information and the process of its development.

Now, within this brief illustration and lacking further elaboration, one might reasonably assume that use of one of the "canned" client workshops would leave something to be desired. It was developed as a training response to the routine types of learning needs manifest among legal, paralegal and client groups associated with TLAS, Inc. Thus, its purpose and content are suspect at least as far as the intended group is concerned. In like manner its coverage of "Texas" law and

rights and responsibilities for the resident is far afield from a group of Spanish speaking immigrants only temporarily located in Texas and likely to be located elsewhere. Lastly, the method involved in the development of the manual might well be suspect as well as its "age" for oftentimes such products grow out of "success" events and are given a stature and a permanence not warrented by the facts or by the passage of time.

Second, after having assessed the document or documents, select that printed information which is completely applicable to your needs study on all six factors.

Third, extrapolations should be made for the data which are not completely congruent with your needs assessment. So, if, as the president of the Christian Churches United, your target population in the needs assessment is unmarried mothers ages sixteen to twenty-one in the Austin area, and if you happen to find several research studies done nationwide on unmarried mothers, you must be careful to retrieve only that data that has relevance to the geographical area and the population addressed in your particular needs assessment. And, to keep you honest as well as to enable repeated access to this or similar documents, we advise you to describe and justify any extrapolations made. When you are well aware of the limitations of your retrieved need data, then you will not tend to overgeneralize.

Fourth, discard that printed information which is judged inappropriate.

Thus, the Principle for Practice is that needs assessors should select information retrieval strategies from printed information to

take into account the factors of purpose, definition, geographical coverage, population, time frame and methodology.

Summary

We have presented to you in this booklet two major types of strategies by which you can feasibly gather information for your needs assessment undertaking. Collection strategies are approaches that you use to actually reach your key informants in the needs assessment for valid and reliable needs data. They should be feasible enough to be adopted by the sponsoring institution.

Retrieval strategies are methods which are capable of eliciting quality needs data from the available printed sources. Each potential printed resource for the needs assessment undertaking should be appraised in terms of the applicability of its purpose, definition, geographical coverage, population, time frame, and methodology to that of the needs assessment. The information appraised can then be either adopted, adapted or discarded.